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ON THE FORMATION OF THE WORD ŚAKUNTALĀ

The traces of a rare diminutive suffix 'lā' in Sanskrit

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The name of undoubtedly the most charming and delicate female character. of Sanskrit literature, viz. Śakuntalā is, grammatically speaking, no less interesting. It has the distinction of containing a suffix which is otherwise very rare in Sanskrit.

It is obvious, to begin with, that the word is a compositum of — roughly speaking, two elements, i. e. Śakunta and tā. The word 'Śakunta' is found right from the beginning of Indian literary history in the sense of 'bird' together with its different variants like śakuni, śakunti and śakuna. The last of these words has simply come to mean 'omen' due to the reason that it was customary with several Indo-European and other races of ancient times to watch the flight of the birds in order to predict the outcome of a certain undertaking. We have a parallel of this word in latin *augurium* which etymologically means 'watching and interpreting the flight of birds' and hence 'omen', 'prophecy', 'predication'. In *augurium* one could easily discern the word *avis* meaning 'bird' and philologically related to Vedic *vis*, originally [a] *vis*, meaning the same thing. In the same manner Greek *ornis* denoted a bird and an omen at the same time. But it is the second part of the word, i. e. 'lā' with which we are mainly concerned here. The traditional Indian view explains it to be formed out of the root √lā = ādāne with the addition of the kṛt suffix ka; śakuntaiḥlātā, ¹ ādattā, svikṛtā, putrīrūpena pālītā vā iti śakuntalā Śakunta + lā + ka + tap (cf. Pāṇini III.2.3 āto 'nupasarge kah'), the girl who has been taken [care of] by the birds is Śakuntalā. The Mahābhārata narrates the circumstances in detail in which the female child of the nymph Menakā and the sage Viśvāmitra was named as such :

| dṛṣṭvā śāyānam śakunāḥ samantāt paryavārayan/
| nemām hiṃsyur vane bālām kravyādā māṃsagrddiṇaḥ//
| paryarākṣanta tām tatra śakuntā menakātmajāṃ /
| upaspraṣṭum gataścāham apaśyam śayitām imām /
| nirjane vipine'raṇye śakuntaiḥ parivāritām // Mbh. Ādiparva 66/12,13

The next śloka is important from the point of view of the etymological explanation of the word :

| nirjane ca vane yasmāt śakuntaiḥ parirakṣitā /
| śakuntalēti nāmāsyāḥ kṛtam cāpi tato mayā // 66 / 14

1. Cf. M. R. Kale's edition of Abhiññānaśakuntalam, p. 1 of Notes.
2. This sūtra falls under the *adhikāra* of *karmaṇi* (Cf. III. 2. 1) which shows that the first element of this compositum should be in accusative case. Instead of 'śakuntaiḥ lātā', therefore, 'śakuntān lāti = gṛhṃāti svarakṣārtham' would be a better *vigraha*. Besides, this does away with past partic. *lātā* which cannot be eliminated with the suffix *ka*. For another grammatically sound explanation cf. Apte's Dictionary : śakuntaiḥ lāyate, ka for ghaṇi. (ghāve ghaṇi, ghaṇīarthē ka-vidhānam).

The sage Kaṇva narrates to Duṣyanta the life history of Śakuntalā and remarks that since she was 'protected by the birds' in a lonely forest he gave her this name. It shows that the author of Mahābhārata, or more exactly this particular portion of the epic approved of the traditional interpretation of the word. In fact, it may even be probable, that this incident in the story of Śakuntalā has been evolved only due to this particular interpretation of her name.

Kalidas alludes to the same incident from the life of Śakuntalā in the 5th Act of Abhijñānaśākuntalam in the following manner showing thereby that to him also this traditional explanation was acceptable :

prāg antariksāgamanāt svam apatyajātam
anyair dvijaiḥ parabhṛtāḥ khalu poṣayanti /V. 22
(mark the expression 'anyair dvijaiḥ poṣayanti')

We shall now examine how far this explanation is grammatically valid. If the second element of the word Śakuntalā viz derives itself from the root *lā*, one would expect the root to be, at least, as old as the word itself. The word is first found in Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa (XIII 5: 14.13) where it is the name of a nymh (apsaras). But it is significant that neither any verbal form nor any derivative of the so called root 'lā' is found in Brāhmaṇas or Saṃhitās barring of course, the single dubious case of 'Kuśala', found to be used in Śatapatha-B. In the later treatises on Sāhityaśāstra this word is quoted as an example of [ni] *rūḍhā lakṣaṇā*, i. e. of a *śabdavyāpāra*, where the original significance of word is transferred due to traditional usage. The etymological meaning of the word is explained as '*kuśān tāti=adatte, anayati va iti kuśalah*', the one who is physically in position to bring the kuśa grass for sacrificial purpose is *kuśala*, i. e. 'a person in sound health' or 'adept' since the cutting of the sharp blades of kuśa involves quite a lot of clever handling; in any case, an adjective.

A closer examination shows, however, that the traditional grammatical explanation is not philologically sound. The word must originally have been a *noun* (neuter gender) meaning 'health' or 'happiness' as is evident from the following cognate words : O. and M. High German *heil* = sound, unhurt and O. Islandic *hugr* = happiness. In Sanskrit it has come to be used as an adjective much in the same way as *pāpam* = sin and *pāpaḥ* = sinful, sinner; with the shifting of the accent *kūśablaḥ* / : (Ved.) *kuśālāḥ* (classical). But side by side with the adjective (*kuśalah* = healthy, happy) we have a word *kuśalin* with exactly the same meaning. *kuśalin* is formed with a suffix '*ini*' (*in*) which is added only to the nouns in the sense of 'possessing something'. 'endowed with something' (Pāṇini V. 2. 115). The word would, therefore, mean 'possessing *kuśalam*', 'endowed with *kuśalam*' showing thereby that the original nominal significance of the word *kuśalam* has been alive throughout the linguistic history of classical Sanskrit. Had '*kuśalam*' been really a compound derivative in adjectival sense containing the root 'lā' (= to take) no further suffixes would have been required to make it, once again, an adjective.

The existence of the root 'lā' modified with the verbal suffix '*ka*' to 'la' (masc.) thus seems to be untenable in the most famous and much discussed about word like '*kuśala*! For the word śakuntalā also, we must, therefore, look around

for some more acceptable explanation which could interpret the formation and the meaning of the word more satisfactorily.

The clue to the actual significance of the element 'lā' is found in the Aṣṭādhyāyī V. 3.83 to 86 *et passim*. In V. 3. 83 Pāṇini prescribes the use of 'la' or 'ila' for making shorter forms of personal names for familiar use. The name Yajñadatta is thus shortened to *Yajñila*, Bhānudatta to *Bhānula* and Devadatta to *Devila* to facilitate the calling by near relatives and close friends. What is more interesting, all these words have their shorter forms ending in 'ka' also: e. g. *yjñika*, *Bhānuka* and *Devika*³

The interchangeability of *taddhita* suffixes 'la' and 'ka' shows a close relationship between the two. The most common use of *taddhita* 'ka' is in forming diminutives from the noun, i.e. the suffix when added to a noun denotes a smaller or lesser degree of the same object. (Cf. Pāṇini V.3.85; ⁸⁶ 'alpe', 'hrasve' *tailakam*, *vṛkṣakaḥ*): *bālaḥ* *bālakaḥ* (small child), *śāvaḥ* > *śāvakaḥ* (smaller fawn or cub & c.). There are, therefore, good reasons to suppose that the use of 'la' to make diminutives was not confined to personal names only but was extended to other form of nouns also.

Between the two diminutives 'ka' and 'la' used in Sanskrit, the diminutive 'la' (IE *los) seems to be older and have been known to the Proto Indo-European language whereas the overgrowth of the forms containing 'ka' is definitely a characteristic development of Sanskrit. We have sufficient traces of *la*-diminutive in cognate Indo-European languages⁴.

IE *los

= Latin *ellos* (m), *ella* (f)

Cf. *umbra* (shadow) *umbrella* (small shadow) *adulescens* *adulescentulus* (young man) (boy) *liber* (book) *libella* (f. small book) *tabula* (table) *tabella* (small table)

= Lithuanian *li*

didis (big) *didelis*⁴ (rather big)

= Old Slavic *lu*

orilu (eagle) cf. Greek *ornis* = the same

= Greek *los*

meḡas > *megalos*

cf. Gothic *mikilis*⁴

In Germanic languages, especially in High German, this diminutive suffix has become very productive. In high and literary form of the language it is found as 'lein'; e.g. *Frau* (woman) > *Fraülein* (young woman, young girl), *Buch* (book) > *Büchlein* (booklet); in southern German (Allemanisch) as 'le': e.g. *Bach* (stream) > *Bächle* (small stream), *Puppe* (doll) > *Puppele* (small doll, also as pet name 'dolly') *Bächle* & c.; and in Swiss German as 'li' *Fisch* > *Fischli* (small fish).

3. Aṣṭādhyāyī V. 3. 78, 79, 83, 84.

4. These examples are from Wackernagel's *Altindische Grammatik*, II 2 863 § 693 aα
The Latin examples are my own.

There are some instances of forming shorter personal names with the help of this suffix in order Indo-European languages also; cf., for example, Middle and New High German, *Bārbarā* > Barbel (*ra* is deleted, as *datta* in the case of Bhānudatta, to make the name shorter.

The ancient IE diminutive suffix * 'los' (Sans. *lah*, *lam* & *lā*) has been ousted in Sanskrit by the far more common and prominent suffix 'ka' to such an extent that it has been able to retain itself only in very rare cases. One of the best examples of this suffix is Vedic (Sūtra) *kanyālā*, meaning 'a small girl'. Wackernagelss) vainly tries to explain this word through dissimilation out of *kanyāna*. In fact, the meaning 'small' girl' is corroborated not only by the context but also by the parallel forms like '*kanyakā*' in Sanskrit.

An excellent example of the diminutive function of the suffix '*la*' seems to be the word under consideration, namely *śakuntalā* which is formed with the base *śakunta* (bird) The most plausible and acceptable meaning of the word *śakuntalā*, therefore, seems to be simply a small bird'. It is not uncommon to find pet names and familiar expressions denoting 'bird' 'small Bird' used in addressing small girls in Indian languages.⁶)

That the word *śakuntalā* means 'small bird' and nothing else is corroborated by the parallel form 'śakuntikā'. Since the diminutives '*la*' and '*ka*' are interchangeable and '*ka*' is much more common, the existence of *śakuṇtikā* is not odd in the fitness of the things but quite expected too. This word is found right from Rgveda (I. 191.11) onward. It is used in Mahabharata (Adiparvas), Harivamśa and in Uttararāmacaritam of Bhavabhūti :

chadmanā dadāmi mṛtyave

śauniko grhaśakuntikām iva/ 1.45

" As somebody would give a small pet bird to a fowler (to be killed by him) o am I delivering [Sītā] to Death deceitfully. "

The word *śakunta* is of masculine gender and mostly denotes big birds⁷. Bhavabhūti here requires a feminine *apṛastuta* so that it may serve as an *upamā* to Sītā. He, therefore, converts *śakunta* to *śakuntikā* and the diminutive *ikā* expresses not only 'smallness' but also helplessness, loveliness and delicacy of a pet bird and transfers these characteristics by virtue of simile on Sītā also.

Every student of Sanskrit grammar is conversant with the identity of *r* and *l* sounds in Sanskrit (*ralayor abhedah*). The *r*-sound abounds in Rgveda and makes way gradually to *l* in the subsequent literature. In fact, *r* is so prominent in Indo-Iranian group that the original IE *l*-sound is almost invariably found as *r* in Avesta and Rgveda. It is, therefore, no wonder that the diminutive suffix '*la*' should be found as '*ra*' in certain cases. We have the following two nice examples of this phenomenon :

5. *Altindische Grammatik*, Band II 2 p. 363 § 231.

6. Cf. the expression '*ciraivā*', or 'son-ciraiyā' (birdie, golden birdie) and mark the diminutive suffix '*iyā*' *Abudhiyā*, *nagariyā*) in Hindi (eastern).

7. Böhtlingk, *Kurzes Petersburger Wörterbuch*, s.v.

8. Cf. *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, Adhyāya 4 and Pādas 3 and 4, *et passim*.

kuṭī (cottage) : *kuṭīra* (a small cottage, cf. Pāṇini V.3.88)

keśa (hair) : *keśara* (tiny hair manes, of a flower, hence also safron);
the from *kesara* is later.

Sometimes the diminutive sense of such suffixes loses its force and suffixes (*la* and *ka*) seem to have been added without any alteration or modification in the base in view, or, to use the Sanskrit terminology ' *svārthe* ' – just for its own sake. With *ka* the examples are numerous : *śanaiḥ* = *śanakaiḥ*, *mayā* = *mayakā*, *gṛham* = *gṛhakam*; *la* also furnishes some good examples : *maṇḍa* = *maṇḍala* (m), *yugam* = *yugalam*, *kumāraḥ* = *kumārilah*, *kokah* = *kokilah* (the last two examples can, however, be interpreted as diminutives also).

One important function of these suffixes, especially of *ka* develops itself out of its use in *svārtha* is to simplify the form and declension of a comparatively difficult noun; take, for example, *vyūḍhoraskah*, where *ka* simply has the function of converting the ending ' s ' (*vyūḍhoras*, *vyūḍhorāḥ*) into a-declension (e.g. *devaḥ*) which is by far the easiest to decline.

It should be noted that the diminutive suffixes are nothing else in their origin but the grammatical elements denoting relationship to something or possession. Though *ka* and *la* or *ra* seem to be very versatile suffixes used in number of senses with different bases, all these senses or different shades of meaning can be reduced to the central idea of ' belonging to ', or ' endowed with ' something. Thus *madhura* is ' endowed with *madhu* ' and *pāmsura* (*la*) ' endowed with *pāmsu* ', cf. also *mṛdura* (*la*), *asura*, *śrīra* or *ślīla* (*ślīla* = without *śrī*), *urmila* (*urmitā*), *granthila*, *valkala*, *damṣṭrāla*, *śarkarāla* (used in *Veṇisamhāra* !) and *śmaśrula*. The adjective *himsra* (fierce, killing) denotes the one who is endowed with the characteristics denoted by the root ' hims ' and *bhidura* with that of ' *bhid* '.

The same is the case with *ka*. A closer examination will show that all its variants like *aka* (i.e. *vuṇi*, *vun*, *ṇvul* & c.), *ika* (i.e. *ṭhaṇi*, *ṭhap*, *ṭhak* & c) and *uka* (e.g. *ukaṇi* & c)⁸ in the words like *nāyaka*, *māsika*, and *kāmuka* etc. bear the same central idea throughout. *Nāgarika* is a person belonging to *nagara* and *nāvika* a person concerned with *nau* (boat); *yājaka* is the one who is endowed with the characteristics denoted by the root *yaj*, etc. etc.

This close affinity between the two suffixes *ka* and *la* and the remarkable identity of their application and usage as well as the equation *kanyakā* : *kanyalā* set against *śakuntikā* : *śakuntalā* prove conclusively that *śakuntalā* must be taken as meaning *śakuntikā* or ' a small, delicate pet bird ', ' a birdie ' used affectionately as a familiar personal name for small girls. The explanation of the word as ' *śakuntaihlātā* ' or ' *śakuntān tāti* ' etc. should be discarded as a mere folk etymology born out of ignorance of the function of an extremely rare diminutive suffix ' *la* ' in Sanskrit.